

Come Home with Me

“Come home with me,” Florence invited Lloyd on a Sunday afternoon in spring, and he gallantly offered her his arm. They walked together on the dusty lane, past fields of wheat and cows with calves, too shy to speak but with smiles inside. Her parents were waiting, watching from the porch, and Florence introduced them to her beau.

They courted through the summer, at church socials and family picnics and walks on Sunday afternoons. She would keep watch for him from her bedroom window and he would whistle as he came down the road, and the shyness went away. In autumn, Lloyd went on bended knee and asked, “Come home with me?” He was nineteen, two years older than she.

They married at her parents’ home, on the first day of winter. Snow lay deep on the forests and fields, but a friend in California sent a box of flowers by train. “Orange blossoms in winter,” said Florence’s father, shaking his head in disbelief. When he had been a boy, his family had spent a month traveling from Minnesota to New York by horse and by foot, for there had been no trains.

After the wedding, Lloyd and Florence found a house in the village. “No more farming for me,” Lloyd declared, but in the autumn his brother died and then his father died, and his

mother was left alone. Lloyd and Florence moved to the family farm on the East Hill, and Florence tended the garden and the chickens, and Lloyd milked the cows and hitched two horses to the plow. A son was born to them and then two daughters, and the family worked together from dawn to dusk, growing food and tending the land.

A cyclone ripped through the county one night, and they lost everything but their lives. “Come home with me,” Florence said, steadfast and sure, and they moved to another farm and built a new home and a barn. They planted a pair of black walnut trees alongside the road, and a daughter was born that spring.

The seasons passed by with joy and sadness, plantings and harvests, another World War. Their four children married and left home then had children and grandchildren of their own.

The hard work grew harder, and Florence and Lloyd sold their chickens and their cows. The horses had been gone since the war. Layers of cobwebs grew into gray lace curtains over the barn windows, and the stalls stood empty in a dimness that grew darker each year. A neighboring farmer plowed and harvested their fields. Visiting grandchildren climbed the black walnut trees, bounced on the rusting tractor seat, and dug holes in the soft dirt where Florence had planted vegetables.

In the evenings, Lloyd and Florence listened on the radio to far-off baseball games and distant news. “Men on the moon,” said Lloyd, shaking his head in disbelief. When he had been a boy, there had been no airplanes or cars.

Florence’s mind took to wandering, forgetful and confused, and then she wandered too. Lloyd found her, a mile down the road, barefoot and coatless on a chilly spring day. “Come home with me,” he said, and she took his hand and went with him, but her sweet smile was

vague and she didn't remember his name. She sat in the corner of the kitchen and rocked the days away, and Lloyd made their meals and kept their home.

He died in the autumn, at the age of eighty-five. Cancer, they said. He was buried in the town cemetery, not far from where his parents and his brother lay. They gave Florence a flower to place on her husband's grave, and she did, though she didn't understand why.

"Come home with me, Mother," said Ruth, taking her mother by the hand. In a downstairs bedroom in Ruth's house, Florence would sit and rock the days away, looking out the window and watching the road, listening for the sound of whistling, waiting for her beau.

Cousins Cindy and Keith took over the farm. In the spring they planted the fields, and in the autumn they harvested the grain. Cindy painted the kitchen, and Keith repaired the barn. A year went by.

Winter came, and snow lay deep on the forests and fields. Blue shadows of the huge walnut trees stretched out thin across the yard. In the kitchen, Cindy looked up to see Lloyd standing silent near where the stove used to be, in the corner where Florence had rocked their youngest daughter to sleep and then later rocked the days away. "Are you looking for Florence?" Cindy asked, and when Lloyd nodded, Cindy told him, "She's at Ruth's house now."

Lloyd nodded again before he went away.

Florence saw him, walking up the snowy road and whistling as he came. She stood to greet him when he came into her room.

"Come home with me," he said, and once again she took his hand, and at last again her smile was both sweet and sure, and she called him by his name.

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In her kitchen, Ruth wiped her hands on her apron before answering the telephone.

“Hello?”

“This is Cindy,” her cousin said. “It’s the strangest thing. I saw your father standing in this kitchen just a few minutes ago.”

Ruth went across the hall to her mother’s room. It was empty now. “Not so strange,” Ruth replied as she tucked the unneeded blanket around her mother’s shoulders. “He came to take Mother home.”

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Author’s Note: This story is true. Lloyd and Florence are my grandparents, and my cousin Cindy saw him in the kitchen the day my grandmother died.